

INTRODUCTION

The Bolognese Phenomenon

I am myself a myth about myself.

Who I am has nothing to do with it.

—SIRI HUSTVEDT, *The Blazing World*, 2014

An anonymous Bolognese drawing in the Louvre offers an intriguing enigma (fig. 1). It portrays a woman seated before an easel, painting a male model. The artist's expression is not visible, since her back faces the viewer; only the male visage on the canvas, depicted in three-quarter view, can be seen over her left shoulder. Although the sheet has a traditional attribution to Annibale Carracci, it is not by that artist and was not included in Catherine Loisel's recent catalogue of Carracci drawings at the Louvre.¹ The drawing reverses the traditional artistic relationship, portraying a woman as active creator and a man as the object of her creation. Whether it was produced by a female artist or by a male artist who was aware of the women artists in his city, the drawing opens a vista onto the unusual opportunities that Bologna offered its creative women during the early modern period.

This book provides the first comprehensive study of Bologna's women artists since Laura Ragg's pioneering examination of the four principal figures more than a century ago.² Seventy years later, Germaine Greer celebrated "the Bolognese phenomenon": the extraordinary proliferation and success of women artists in early modern Bologna.³ And, make no mistake, the circumstances for women artists in Bologna were indeed extraordinary. After considerable

FIG. 1 Anonymous Bolognese artist, *Woman Painting a Man*, ca. 1600. Drawing, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. 7311. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York.



archival research, I have uncovered sixty-eight women artists from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries who were recorded by early writers or in early documents in Bologna—three times as many as were known to Greer and her contemporaries in the 1970s and considerably more than are chronicled in any other Italian city at the time (chart 1).⁴ These numbers are remarkable, given that most artists then were men—in 1559, Annibale Caro termed painting “the profession of gentlemen”—and there were formidable obstacles to women’s artistic careers.⁵ Also remarkable is the diversity of Bolognese women’s specializations. Although most, in this city as elsewhere, were painters (women painters are termed *pittrici*), Bologna also boasted women sculptors, printmakers, embroiderers, and *disegnatrici* (female creators of drawings). During the seventeenth century, almost half of Bologna’s thirty-five female painters received public commissions, an achievement probably unmatched anywhere else in Europe. Another striking piece of evidence previously overlooked by scholars is that more than half of the forty-four women artists recorded in Bologna during that century received professional training from men who were not family members. This educational opportunity differed from anywhere else in Italy and promoted the proliferation of women artists in the city.

Scholars have sometimes generalized that Bologna outstripped other Italian cities in the success of its women artists, but no one has substantiated that claim concretely. So, to compare Bologna with other locations, I have done a census of all fifteenth- to eighteenth-century non-Bolognese Italian women recorded as artists in early documents or

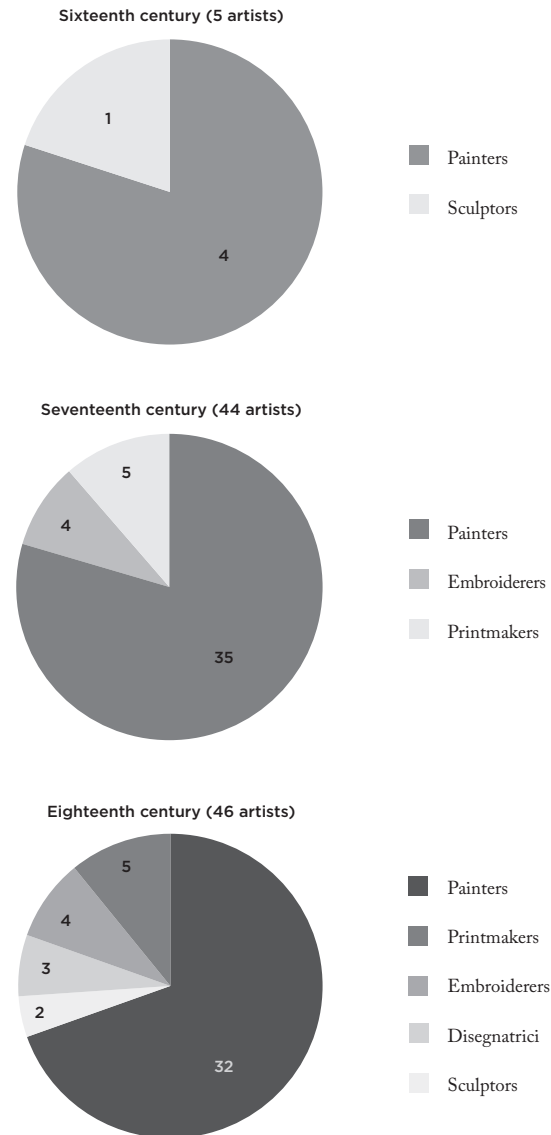


CHART 1 Sixty-eight recorded women artists in early modern Bologna

Women who lived in two centuries are counted in both.

Not noted here: One fifteenth-century painter.

TABLE 1 Demographics of women artists in seventeenth-century Italian cities

City	Median population	Number of recorded women artists	Women artists per 1,000 inhabitants
Venice	145,000	29	0.20
Rome	100,000	24	0.24
Florence	69,000	23	0.33
Bologna	58,000	44	0.76

by early writers through the eighteenth century. Although these statistics will change somewhat over time, given the many scholars who work on this material, the current number of recorded Italian women artists outside Bologna is about two hundred. Table 1 compares the population density of women artists in the four Italian cities with the largest number of female practitioners during the seventeenth century, based on median population estimates in Venice, Rome, Florence, and Bologna.⁶ No city can compare with Bologna, either in the raw numbers of its recorded women artists or in the proportion of those artists in relationship to the total population.⁷

I had originally planned to conclude this book with the seventeenth century, as it marks the culmination of women's artistic achievements in Bologna. But since Bologna's art academy, the Accademia Clementina, was founded in the early eighteenth century and elected many local women as honorary members, it seemed necessary to consider this century in some measure as well. The book's focus remains on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, addressing eighteenth-century developments selectively, when pertinent to key themes. All sixty-eight

women artists through the eighteenth century are treated in appendix 1, which provides key information and references to all documentation and early sources through the nineteenth century. Appendices 2 and 3 supply further documentation on Lavinia Fontana and Elisabetta Sirani, respectively.

Following a key first chapter discussing the distinctive character of Bolognese early biographies on women artists, three chapters trace the chronological evolution of Bologna's women artists, showing how women became true professionals, progressing from the private sector to the public arena. Chapter 2 examines early antecedents, particularly in the sixteenth century, when two of the four recorded women painters and one sculptor became the first professional female artists in the city. They received public commissions, created drawings and engravings, and competed with men for important commissions. In chapter 3, we move to the mid-seventeenth century, focusing on Elisabetta Sirani, the most successful woman artist of early modern Bologna. She transformed the possibilities for female artists and became an international phenomenon, who was celebrated particularly by her compatriots

but also worked for prominent foreign patrons. Sirani was the first Bolognese woman who was principally active as a history painter, particularly of religious subjects. Her public and private devotional works, constituting the majority of her production, as well as a smaller group of allegorical, mythological, and historical paintings, marked a groundbreaking incursion into subjects that were traditionally dominated by men and supplied new opportunities for iconographic originality. Sirani's example decisively changed the climate for women artists in Bologna. Her many successors during the late Seicento and Settecento are considered in chapter 4, which examines such pivotal developments as women's new access to artistic training from men who were not family members. This chapter also considers the impact of Bologna's new Accademia Clementina (founded in 1709) on women artists in the city.

The remainder of the book is organized thematically, with each chapter addressing some aspect of the central question that arises with the compelling evidence of Bologna's distinctiveness: What made this one city uniquely receptive to female agency? Three individual chapters in part 2 deal with patronage and collecting, signatures and self-portraits, and prints and drawings.

In some ways, Bologna was unusual as an environment for women, but in other respects, it was more typical. Mauro Carboni has shown that the dotal system, a dual disadvantage to early modern women that mandated the transfer of funds from the wife's family to the husband's and limited women's rights to inheritance, was established early in Bologna. Bolognese statutes of 1234 were among the first in Italy to codify women's exclusion from any further rights to inheritance after receipt of their dowries. But dowry inflation,

which exacerbated the intrinsic imbalances of the dowry system, began later in Bologna than in Florence or Venice, occurring primarily during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Carboni's research shows how Bologna's Monte del Matrimonio, founded in 1583, unlike similar entities elsewhere in Italy, primarily supported families lower down the economic ladder, promoting savings and marriage among the poor and middle-income population.⁸ Nicholas Terpstra suggests that in Bologna, which other Italian cities viewed as a model for dealing with the poor, women were the principal beneficiaries of charitable organizations. He examines local institutions such as the Opera Pia dei Poveri Mendicanti, which assisted indigent women in the city.⁹

A crucial factor in making Bologna uniquely receptive to women was its venerable university, the oldest in Europe, which provided intellectual networks that supported many women artists and their patrons. Whereas Lavinia Fontana, among others, benefited from the patronage of university scholars, Teresa Muratori is one of several women painters who were born into academic, rather than artistic, families. Due to this intellectual environment, which also promoted female literacy,¹⁰ and Bologna's growing monastic population (discussed in chapter 2), numerous Bolognese women writers, scholars, musicians, and religious leaders emerged. Some were celebrated by their compatriots as early as the thirteenth century, long before Bologna achieved recognition as a center for female visual artists. Crucially, it was this group that first established Bologna's reputation as a center for learned and creative women, laying the foundations for professional women artists who emerged only in the sixteenth century.



FIG. 2 Gabriele Brunelli or Giuseppe Maria Mazza(?), *Portrait of Bitisia Gozzadini*, ca. 1680–90. Terracotta sculpture. Collezioni d'Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio, Bologna. On deposit at the Museo della Storia di Bologna.

There is both literary and visual evidence suggesting that accomplished women writers, scholars, and artists were understood as complementary components of a distinctive feature of Bolognese culture. The poem by the Bolognese Giulio Cesare Croce titled *La gloria delle donne* of 1590 celebrates women from these different vocations. After extolling some exceptional women from antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as women writers from other Italian cities during his own century, Croce turns to

Bologna.¹¹ He devotes three pages to praising Bolognese women writers, scholars, and visual artists, such as the fourteenth-century poet Giovanna de' Bianchetti,¹² the writer Bettina d'Andrea Calderini (d. 1355) who was conversant in both Greek and Latin,¹³ the sculptor Properzia de' Rossi, and the painter Lavinia Fontana. A century later, a series of terracotta busts depicted twelve distinguished Bolognese women (fig. 2). Datable probably to the 1670s or early 1680s and recently attributed to Gabriele Brunelli or Giuseppe Maria Mazza, the twelve figures represent a fascinating mix of accomplished women from different vocations who lived from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Nine busts portray writers and scholars, while three depict visual artists. The patron (from the noble Bolognese Fabri family) and artist of this series connected such women as Croce had, confirming their common pride in the varied and distinguished accomplishments of local women.¹⁴

The earliest woman portrayed in the series is Bitisia (or Bettisia) Gozzadini (1209–1261), a legendary thirteenth-century jurist who allegedly obtained her doctorate from the university in 1236, received a professorial chair there, and delivered a funeral oration for Bologna's deceased bishop Enrico Fratta (d. 1241). Early Bolognese historians frequently extoll Gozzadini's accomplishments, which seem improbable for a woman in this period; no extant documentation corroborates these accounts. Alessandro Macchiavelli, a university scholar who had his own reasons for exaggerating Gozzadini's scholarly distinction, used forged documents to embellish her reputation for erudition in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ This falsification of one woman's achievements

provides fascinating evidence of the Bolognese preoccupation with the city's accomplished women.

Gozzadini was one of a handful of Bolognese female writers and scholars from the Dugento and Trecento who were recorded by early writers. They were succeeded by ten women in the Quattrocento, thirty in the Cinquecento, twenty-five in the Seicento, and at least twenty-two in the Settecento.¹⁶ These developments parallel widespread patterns in the Italian peninsula that have been discussed by literary scholars. Bologna, however, boasts a few singular aspects. One woman, Caterina Vigri, was a “living saint” and a writer, painter, and musician, which played a pivotal role in sanitizing all three vocations for women in Bologna. But as we shall see in chapter 2, although Vigri exemplifies women's capacity to write, paint, and play music, her example, like Gozzadini's, also illustrates a central problem for the study of medieval and early modern women: the distortion of the historical record by some writers. Although some stories about exceptional Bolognese women are not historically verifiable, Bologna's identity as a city notable for its unusually talented women in various cultural sectors contributed to making it the site of the largest number of recorded women artists in the Italian peninsula.

This book also explores several other factors that added to the celebration of women artists and writers as a distinctive component of Bolognese cultural capital. One of the most important, discussed in chapter 1, is a revolutionary new approach to female biography by early Bolognese writers, who promulgated the achievements of their female compatriots in ways that were unmatched elsewhere in Italy. Particularly during

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Bolognese authors evinced an unprecedented level of interest in local women artists, becoming the first Italian writers to claim female accomplishments as central components of local cultural identity.

Chapter 5 examines how unusually diverse artistic patronage in the city also promoted women's success. In addition to a sizeable local nobility of about seventy families who were commissioning artworks, many citizens from lower- and middle-income families were active as patrons and collectors. Some women produced their most original works for wealthy local businessmen. The socioeconomic diversity of their patrons can be linked to the diversity of women's subjects and media.

In contrast to the anonymity of the artist portrayed in the drawing with which this chapter began, many women artists in Bologna claimed the authorship of their works through the frequent use of signatures and creation of numerous self-portraits. As we shall see in chapter 6, although women artists throughout Italy produced self-portraits, some Bolognese women painters signed their works at exceptionally high rates, a singular practice in a city where male painters signed infrequently. Although the inception of this practice was probably a defensive response to skepticism about women's capabilities, the results occasioned both new opportunities for creativity and a compelling verification of authorship that has contributed to the large number of works by Bolognese women that can still be identified today.

Another key issue in promoting the advances of women artists in Bologna, considered in chapter 7, was unprecedented admiration for the drawings of one extraordinary Bolognese woman

painter, Elisabetta Sirani. Her dazzling accomplishments on paper confirmed women's capacity for artistic invention, placing them on a par with their most famous male contemporaries. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized how new such praise for women's drawings and inventiveness was; outside of Bologna, such skills were rarely credited to women. In addition to creating drawings, many Bolognese women made prints. A few female printmakers, such as Veronica Fontana, worked in book publishing, and one woman (Sirani) was among the first recorded female *peintres-graveurs*. Along with the other factors

noted above—the impact of the university; the networks of women writers, scholars, and religious leaders who reinforced and sanitized local appreciation of accomplished women; the influence of innovative early biographies; the diverse patronage that offered unusual opportunities to women artists; and the frequency of signatures and self-portraits—Bolognese women's drawings and prints contributed to the exceptional appreciation of their works.